



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### "Femininity in crisis"

**Citation for published version:**

Jones, C 2015, "Femininity in crisis": The troubled trajectory of feminism in Laura Hird's *Born Free* and Jenni Fagan's *The Panopticon*, *Contemporary Women's Writing*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 385-400.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpv007>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1093/cww/vpv007](https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpv007)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Contemporary Women's Writing

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

©Jones, C. (2015). "Femininity in Crisis": The Troubled Trajectory of Feminism in Laura Hird's *Born Free* and Jenni Fagan's *The Panopticon*. *Contemporary Women's Writing*.

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



## **"Femininity in Crisis": The Troubled Trajectory of Feminism in Laura Hird's *Born Free* and Jenni Fagan's *The Panopticon***

### *Abstract*

This essay traces a trajectory between the diminution of the radical objectives of second wave feminism and the rise of postfeminism in two contemporary novels by Scottish writers. Laura Hird's *Born Free* (1999) and Jenni Fagan's *The Panopticon* (2012) illustrate the shrinking of radical feminist ideals to a sexual revolution appropriated by the individualism, consumerism and competitive market-focused ideology which characterises neoliberal postfeminism and sustains misogynist social structures. Informed by critiques of postfeminism by commentators such as Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill, the essay finds Hird's end of century pessimistic vision of female defeat allayed to some extent in Fagan's gothic-tinged narrative of a marginalised outsider evading neo-patriarchal containment. The texts demonstrate a damaging disorientation in contemporary femininity produced by what McRobbie terms the postfeminist gender settlement.

---

In this essay I investigate the disorientation of femininity in two contemporary Scottish novels, by which I mean a perceived crisis in female selfhood for both younger and older protagonists. The chosen texts register and scrutinize changing relations with and conceptualizations of feminism in the post-"second wave" era, posing difficult questions for feminist futures. My argument is drawn from existing analyses of what Angela McRobbie calls the "new femininities" of a "post-feminist gender settlement" (57) which contend that the neoliberalised postfeminist context is a cultural moment of "double entanglement" (6). This suggestive phrase describes

the contradictory and paradoxical circumstances which characterise gender relations and identities in the opening decades of the twenty-first century. For McRobbie postfeminism delineates a discursive regime which "positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force" (12). This process of disarming the radical potential of feminism appropriates the emancipatory language of second wave feminism which demanded *freedom* and *choice* but deploys it in promotion of an extreme individualism. In its "modernity", this individualism is presented as a substitute for a feminism that fought collectively against the oppressive structural inequalities which constrained individual lives. I argue here that this mobilisation of contemporary cultural tensions of liberation and constraint informs the femininities represented in Laura Hird's *Born Free* (1999) and Jenni Fagan's *The Panopticon* (2012) and their contrasting challenges to the present gender settlement.

In describing this context as one of a perceived crisis in female selfhood, my previous engagement with the notion of crisis tendencies in relation to gender is relevant. Amidst a media context that seemed constantly decrying a "crisis in masculinity" in the late twentieth century, R.W. Connell argued that masculinity, not being a coherent system but "a configuration of practice *within* a system of gender relations", cannot itself be thought of as in crisis; "We can, however, logically speak of the crisis of a gender order as a whole" (84). Therefore, with regard to wide use of the term, I argued that in the last decade of the twentieth century, "talk of a crisis of masculinity" became "shorthand to describe this crisis of the gender order" (Jones 22). However, presently we are challenged to make sense of a predicament where the apparent freedoms and opportunities available for women exist against a social

backdrop of ongoing and, at times, increasing misogyny and sexism, alongside which certain hysterical styles of femininity simultaneously facilitate and constrain these new feminine freedoms. It is tempting to once again fall back on media hyperbole and describe our contemporary era, as articulated in this fiction, as one of a "crisis of femininity"; perhaps we can posit this as the *new* shorthand for the ongoing crisis of the gender order. In effect, this essay examines the context of that reversal of the nature of this popular conception of crisis through the lens of a critique of postfeminism. In this particular moment of gender crisis, and in a social context where "it is acknowledged that seeking to achieve a feminine identity makes women and girls ill" (McRobbie 97), this essay investigates what I term feminine disorientation and how it is interrogated in these two contemporary Scottish novels.

Scottish fiction provides an intriguing environment for this topic. In the last two decades of the twentieth century Scottish devolutionary writing<sup>1</sup> and its obsession with men in an age of tumultuous social change brought us the difficult challenges to traditional, often working-class masculinities and a masculinised national identity. Though challenged and often derided by prominent male writers as varied in style as Alasdair Gray, James Kelman and Irvine Welsh, a complacent Scottish masculinism could be seen, in one interpretation, as archaic, outmoded and "in crisis", yet lingering still centre stage in the face of a lack of alternative visions of masculinity (see Jones 2009). A vibrant women's writing infused with a feminist impulse, energy and outrage provided a more certain contestation in ambitious texts which categorically interrogated gender roles and power relations. The tentative optimism for the future at the end of novels such as Janice Galloway's *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989) and *Foreign Parts* (1995), and A.L. Kennedy's *Looking for the Possible Dance* (1993) and *So I Am Glad* (1995) was based on female

empowerment and independence, an overcoming of patriarchally engendered oppression and trauma. These writers and others like them were keen to expose the complexities of the oppression of women but they often rejected the label 'feminist' as a constitutive influence and informed definition of their writing. Though their work has led to them "being identified with the concerns of feminism" (Norquay 142), these writers rarely presented a vision for a changed sociality, an imaginative route to equality and liberation in the terms of the radical goals of second wave feminism. When new social relations were envisioned they remained constrained by the normative, as in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998), which presented a queered portrait of a very normatively structured nuclear family. Therefore, much devolutionary women's writing remained distanced from the foregrounded aims of radical feminist discourse, and never openly aspired to go beyond the goals of a liberal, equality, assimilationist feminism which left intact many masculinist assumptions of the social context.

A more cutting social critique emerged through the wayward young females who appeared in Scottish fiction later in the 1990s, in the work of Alan Warner, for instance; characters such as the eponymous *Morvern Callar* (1995) and the girls and young women of *The Sopranos* (1998) and its sequel *The Stars in the Bright Sky* (2010) were disaffected, brazenly anti-authority and hedonistic in their appropriation of "masculine" pleasures and adventure. They parallel one discourse of postfeminism which revels in individual freedoms while extolling the "pastness" of a feminism constructed as no longer needed (see McRobbie and Gill).

The political dead-end of both these strategies was brought into searing relief by Laura Hird's *Born Free*, a novel which can be read as fundamentally critiquing both the assimilationist and hedonistic feminisms of its predecessors as illustrated in its generational analysis of female sexual liberation. This gave propulsion to a

female-authored disaffected genre which finds expression in more recent Scottish texts that continue the interrogation of feminine disorientation, for example, Jenni Fagan's *The Panopticon* (2012) and Kerry Hudson's *Tony Hogan Bought Me an Ice Cream Float Before He Stole My Ma* (2012). These novels depict a world of sexual violence, misogyny, ineffectual or psychotic mothers, and isolation and alienation from feminist history as a framework for understanding contemporary gender oppression. This focus on young female protagonists highlights second wave feminism's stunted success in securing an emancipated future for women, and the flight from Scotland in the latter texts signals a certain pessimism in relation to a specifically Scottish-situated recalibration of feminist struggle.

In this essay I explore the Hird and Fagan novels as "feminine disorientation" texts, which present confusion, uncertainty and contradiction as central to the contemporary experience of female selfhood, and investigate their positioning with regard to discourses of femininity and feminism. Though currently ignored in the critical literature, both novels are illuminating in their study of disaffected femininity and generate insights into the ambiguities and breakdown of developing feminine orthodoxies. Moreover, as working-class fictions they address the intersections of class and gender which overly-determine women's lives and freedoms and interrogate the constructing of class as a cultural rather than an economic issue, an approach so effectively realised in neoliberal individualism. Inequality circumscribes the opportunities of these characters, underpinning their specific vulnerability to exploitation even in their moments of protest.

*Born Free* registers the dreary monotony of working-class life and relationships in prose that is sparse and bleak in its poetics. This gives apt expression to an agonising illustration of the failures of liberal feminism and the implications of a

postfeminist transition as teenage Joni and her mother Angie strive to live up to the yearnings and contradictory ideals of sexual emancipation. The more gothic tones of *The Panopticon* give extra dimension to the struggle of teenage Anais to evade and escape the threat of violence and incarceration that underlies her orphaned and homeless life which is haunted by the spectres of failed liberation figured as her lost mothers. In contrast to Hird's depiction, Fagan's protagonist's unruly consciousness and sensibility give some hope for the future and for evasion of the constraints of the neoliberal present. The trajectory between the two novels inscribes the fraught relation with feminism of a new century's generation of young women in the aftermath of a stunted and stymied feminist revolution, tracing the distortion and repression of feminist goals and ideals in the neoliberal context. While *Born Free* deploys a family based generational conflict, an image often used to characterise second wave feminism and its relation with its successors, *The Panopticon* presents the reader with a greater alienation from the mainstream for its forsaken group of outsiders, making the social margins a suggestive context for exploring the possibility of evading the damaging consequences of the disorientating ideals of contemporary femininities.

### **The Shrinking Feminist Revolution in *Born Free***

*Born Free* emerged from the Edinburgh writing scene of the 1990s particularly associated with *Rebel Inc.*, Kevin Williamson's counter-cultural literary magazine which published the early work of writers such as Irvine Welsh, Alan Warner and Laura Hird. This fiction focused on the dark "undersides" of Scottish culture and subcultures; work such as Welsh's infamous portrayal of the Scottish capital's drug scene in *Trainspotting* (1993) challenged mainstream values and expressed a raw

and anarchic disaffection from the materializing oppressions of the neoliberal hegemony. Emerging with the rise of a conservative rightwing politics in Britain and the U.S., neoliberal culture prioritised the individual, free markets and free choice, and the privatization of experience. This political and economic doctrine, amounting since the 1980s to a "kind of secular faith" (Duggan xiii), took the classical liberal premise of the absolute freedom of capitalist markets and trading relationships and "cascaded these principles into the social realm with a central assumption that societies function best with a minimum of state intervention" (Phipps 11). In terms of its structuring of subjectivities, neoliberalism has become "a normative framework, based on the idea of citizens as rational and self-interested economic actors with agency and control over their own lives. Within its architecture political and social problems are converted into market terms, becoming individual issues with consumption-based solutions" (11). Rosalind Gill points out the striking "degree of fit between the autonomous postfeminist subject and the psychological subject demanded by neoliberalism" (260), and its repression of, in particular, class and race based analyses of power relations and structures. The neoliberal model prioritises the individual, positing the self as a project – autonomous, self-reliant, self-inventing and self-monitoring through the mechanisms of the free-market. *Born Free* presents a critique of this contemporary "life politics" (McRobbie 19), specifically in relation to the placing of young women as its exemplary agents.

Firstly, though, Hird's novel is notable for its focus on a more traditional feminist target: a nuclear family and the tensions which threaten to pull it apart. The text is structured as a series of chapters set in a rotating sequence of first-person narrations by sixteen year old Joni, father Vic, fourteen year old Jake and mother Angie. This formal demarcation of narrative territory, while conceding equal voice to



each family member, also emphasises the alienation of the individuals from each other. Though their narratives overlap, an overall communal view or a directly reported dialogue between different parties are not available; the text accumulates a layered multidimensional approach to the family structure, undermining its integrity and constituting a series of high velocity snapshots of the period of intense crisis that the novel chronicles. Its focus on the family, and within that a particularly fractious mother and daughter relationship, enables its framing as a text in critical relation with feminism.

The bourgeois institution of the family was strenuously highlighted by second wave feminism as a privileged site of women's oppression and exploitation; naturalizing their place as nurturers and carers in the home, it perpetuates and encourages their confinement to the private, domestic sphere of social life, an arrangement validated and rationalized by a classic liberal ideology which divides the private from the public. *Born Free* evokes the feminist campaigns for emancipation from the constraints of the private realm in order to interrogate them, particularly the demands for equal pay, equal education and job opportunities, and sexual liberation which had formed the basic demands of feminist organisations such as the Women's National Coordinating Committee in the British context (Whelehan 5); it scrutinizes the outcomes for working-class women at the end of the twentieth century. Exhortations from Betty Friedan onwards to the present day for women to "have it all", family and career, expose the focus of a liberal feminism confined to middle-class women; working-class working mothers were more likely to be the subject of other discourses which criticised them, for example, "as a major factor in the causation of juvenile delinquency" (Weeks 257). However, working women like Angie coming of age in the 1980s were not immune to the "superwoman" ideal that chimes

across the decades and classes to mock them in the name of an assimilation feminism which "sent women out into the public realm without summoning men into the private domain to pick up their fair share of the slack" (Tong 28). This liberal feminism's failure to adequately address the structural change necessary to arrive at women's equality constituted an often wilful blind spot. Moreover, working-class women like Angie are highly conscious of their exclusion from this assimilatory vision; as she observes, "I'd rather have a career, you know, a bit of fulfilment but it's like I missed the new way of thinking" (96).

Angie struggles with the dual roles involved in job and family. She works full-time in a betting shop, a low-paid, oppressive occupation which sometimes incurs threats of violence. She also services the family, appearing to do all the cooking, cleaning and shopping, arriving home "wearing what looks like a hula skirt of Somerfield bags" (11), as Vic exotically trivialises this burdensome task, sexualising Angie in the manner of a domestic grotesque. She seeks escape from her mundane and loveless life through an affair with her boss Raymond, a drunken, sexual odyssey through which she finds temporary validation. This sexual liberation echoes the ideals of the sexual revolution of the 1960s when the "vision of individual fulfilment, pleasure and freedom as legitimate revolutionary goals" (Jackson and Scott 4) proffered the emancipation of both women and men equally, and particularly informed radical feminist critiques of the family and the sexual double standard that dictated "sexuality was bad for women and that only 'bad' women were sexual" (5). Though part of a greater desire for social change, Angie represents this social revolutionary vision shrinking to the ambit of individual sexual expression, significantly in a postfeminist context that promotes a renewed mystique of individual autonomy. Moreover, her idea of pleasure relies on a defiantly male sexual model

predicated on a pornographic discourse of dominance and submission: she describes her first sexual encounter with Raymond as "the most exciting, uncontrollable 60 seconds I've ever experienced. Just to be taken like that, almost like rape. To be treated like some kind of slut" (121). Angie's reaction to filmic representations of sexual violence, admitting "I know I shouldn't find it sexy but I do" (23), further expresses this attraction to a conscious transgressing of repressive sexual proprieties in a manner associated with pornographic imagery. This sexual model informs her frequently expressed yearning for gender roles which institute male dominance; for instance, she criticises Vic for not "belting" the children and bemoans marrying "such a big girl's blouse" (21). In a perfectly calibrated compliment to the pornographic violence, she also craves romance when she wonders if she has finally met her "soulmate" (60) in Raymond. These submissive expressions of female sexual desire distort and manipulate the discourse of sexual liberation in the service of what turns out to be an exploitative masculine dominance.

Joni also seeks self-substantiation through sex. Approaching her sixteenth birthday, she is an unruly and disaffected young woman who, on the surface, resists pressure to conform to aspects of the new femininities in which "having a well-planned life emerges as a social norm" (McRobbie 77) that imposes responsibility on the individual to take advantage of the marketplace of opportunities for self-improvement. Several times Joni actively refuses her mother's ambitions for her to go into higher education, claiming she will "get a job in Burger King instead, to spite her" (3). However, in Joni's obsession with sex, and her aim to lose her virginity while sex for her is still illegal, the novel further highlights the constructing of a discourse of sexual freedom as an essential component of women's liberation and self-realisation. In the postfeminist context, though, the focus on a "consumerist

approach to empowerment and choice" (Phipps 77) propels a marked sexualisation of culture which hails a mainstreaming of the commodification of sex rather than radical sexual emancipation. For critics like Gill the contemporary sexualised culture signals a transition from objectification to subjectification: "women are not straightforwardly objectified but are presented as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so" (258). This double entanglement traps women within a particular model of sexuality and Angie illustrates a point of convergence in these discursive regimes where a woman availing herself of sexual agency is confined and judged in relation to the discourses which framed the objectification of women. The identifiable pornographic imagery and language through which she expresses her sexuality also denotes the postfeminist moment described by Gill:

It represents a shift in the way that power operates: a shift from an external male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze. I would argue that it represents a higher or deeper form of exploitation than objectification – one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime. In this regime power is not imposed from above or from the outside, but constructs our very subjectivity. We are invited to become a particular kind of self, and endowed with agency on condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy that is found in pornography. (258)

However, older women are not the primary targets of this discourse, which is another reason for Angie's disgrace. Joni is the favoured inheritor of this postfeminist liberation.

In her exercise of agency, Joni's aberrant consumption – stealing clothes and money, drinking and taking drugs – constructs her as a rebel in relation to the proprieties of virtuous femininity. However, this lawless behaviour is directed at developing her sexual agency in the service of male attention as she deliberately makes herself sexually vulnerable to the exploitation of older men. On the evening before her birthday, when she fails to seduce her friend Rosie's uncle, a known paedophile, she hitches a lift with a lorry driver and finally loses her virginity in his cab. The mundane and fleeting nature of this event underscores Joni's confusion at her lack of pleasure and success in her encounters; they are short-lived and defined by sex which replaces intimacy with the competitive and instrumental relations of commodification. However, traditional expectations continue to shape Joni's desires; on learning the lorry driver is married she thinks, "How could he do that to me if he was married? He seems so decent" (207). Joni's struggle for subjectification in line with a postfeminist empowered sexuality is besieged by an ongoing insidious objectification of women on the part of men, a discourse which saturates the novel from Jake's onanistic rituals with women's magazines to everyday banter between men: "'And where is your beautiful daughter today?' Asif inquires [...] 'D'you want her? Two hundred Silk Cut and a bottle of Tia Maria and she's yours.' 'For how long?' he grins, raising his eyebrows" (9). If sex is empowering for women, it seems that men were never informed.

If Joni's sexual journey is constrained by this further "double entanglement" of subjectification and objectification, Angie's liberation is also frustrated; Raymond, having persuaded her to hand over responsibility for the shop's banking, steals thousands of pounds of takings and disappears, abandoning her. This denouement of the affair reveals her sexual exploitation as part of his plan making her a victim of

her own delusions of romantic emancipation. As critiques of sexual liberation have noted, the consequences for women and men were very different and "in retrospect many women felt that 'sexual liberation' meant greater access for men to women's bodies" (Jackson and Scott 4), leaving misogynist structures intact. This is a circumstance reiterated under the contemporary postfeminist discursive regime in terms of the current "conflation of sexual liberation and gender equality" observed by feminist commentators, which, as Hemmings argues, "consistently reduces the latter to the freedom to exercise (hetero)sexual independence" (Hemmings 142).

The conclusion of the novel enacts a reinstating of the security of the family unit and a retrenchment of the patriarchal power it supports. For Joni the family represents finally a kind of haven when "everyone I know is either a bastard, a paedophile or a sadist" (242). The consequences of Angie's determination, for lack of alternatives, to stay with her dubiously docile husband are staked out in Vic's closing monologue and the final lines of the novel:

I crush my lips against hers and try to force my tongue between them. It's not until she turns her head, to avoid me, that I taste the tears. Their briny tang just makes me worse. I breathlessly inquire if she's all right. Her lack of response, other than the sub-sexual pant of her sobbing and her hands on my arse, is all I need.

As I push into her, she lets out a wail. Her arms drop to her sides but still she makes no sign that she wants me to stop. As I lean down to kiss away the fresh tears, the only resistance is in her eyes. I pretend not to notice. This isn't going to take long anyway. (274)

Vic's authority is re-established sexually in this excruciating ending which emphasises the ambivalent language of passion and romance which presents male

desire as aggression; the violence of Vic's actions – "crushing" and "forcing" – is met by Angie's lack of physical response, and her sobbing, characterised as "sub-sexual" by Vic, an indication of the readiness to sexualise ambivalent female behaviour. The traditional active and passive gender roles are reinstated here, signalling no ultimate change in relations; the drop of her arms, his commanding height above her reinforce this in the particularly fraught arena of sexual intercourse.

Returning the women to the confines of a re-stabilised family structure posits the failure of liberal feminism to have effected change in the most basic of social institutions and gender power relations, specifically here in the context of the working class. This illustration of a diminution of the revolutionary ideals of sexual liberation to the confines of a masculinised sexual imaginary marks the transition to a postfeminism successfully promoting the double entanglement of feminine freedom and constraint to a new generation.

### **The Nowhere Girl of *The Panopticon***

Anais Hendricks, the fifteen year old narrator of *The Panopticon*, is an outsider to the bourgeois family model; an orphan and living under the care of social services since the death of her adopted mother, the novel opens with Anais' transfer to a children's home called The Panopticon. Whereas *Born Free* chronicles the preservation of the family, situated on these social margins Fagan's novel signals the breakdown and dysfunction of that nuclear model. The instability this causes is heightened in what can be described as the gothic characteristics of the text: the "looming" (5), isolated, converted children's home with the stone winged cat topping the gate post which is a major emblem and, in certain magic moments, seems alive; Anais' perceptions of other worlds haunting the present; and her uncanny psychic abilities – to discern

people's traumatic and abusive histories, to see the past, to read people's thoughts. These subtly deployed tropes amount to a suggestive gothic sensibility, and in this they gesture towards the limits of a rationalised world in which the institution of the family plays a stabilising part. The truth of the supernatural phenomena is undecideable, and is further complicated by the widespread use of drugs by young people in the novel, a survival strategy which challenges the authority of the dominant social structures and the reality constructed through them. These "inmates" of the care system, as they see themselves, expose the violence of the world's disregard, of being defined as "no-ones from nowhere".

Alternative kinship relations are foregrounded in the novel, particularly in the care home where "the girls develop unusually strong bonds, they are a family" (297) according to careworker Angus. However, Anais' relation to her own history is characterised and complicated by loss, isolation and yearning. The death of her birth mother at the time of her birth in a psychiatric hospital obscures her nativity in mystery and she reiterates throughout the text a fantasy about her origins; "In all actuality they grew me – from a bit of bacteria in a Petri dish. An experiment, created and raised just to see exactly how much, fuck you, a nobody from nowhere can take" (31). The experiment, as she terms her creators, form a shadowy cadre she purports to glimpse everywhere – men in wide-brimmed black hats without noses observe and stalk her in her peripheral vision. Paranoid delusion or not, the suggestion of a threatening parallel dimension forms part of the novel's liminality, and, in addition, this fantastic narrative structures Anais' psychic life around eluding and escaping the experiment. Anais' birth mother is also a fantastical and mythical presence, characterised as a "cigarillo-smoking Outcast Queen" by the monk, a resident of the hospital who claims to have witnessed Anais' birth, and her mother's escape on a



winged cat. This anonymous shadow is not the only mother in the text; Anais was adopted by Teresa when she was eleven years old. This happy relationship ends when Teresa, a sex worker, is murdered by one of her clients, leaving a bewildered and angry Anais to the vagaries of the care system. In contrast to mother-daughter relationships signalling the generational conflict of second-wave feminism, Anais' position with regard to her mothers demonstrates her violent separation from a powerful female heritage of resistance to the dominant patriarchally defined social reality. "Outsider Queens", no less, these figures are a threat to the priorities of a rationalised reality and the sexual restrictions of normative social relations; their violent ends enact a sobering punishment. Anais is haunted by her mothers and yearns for their lost love and support. This haunting may be construed as an example of the "monstrous spectre" (Munford and Waters, 18) of feminism observed to be troubling contemporary popular culture, often in the form of the "pathologized figure of the mother" (115); however, in this novel these mothers represent a radical subversive power and sexual lawlessness which inspire and energise the rebellious and dissident impulses in Anais herself.

Anais' necessary self-invention resonates with the "autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism" (Gill and Scharff, 7). Yet the emphasis here is on the fictional construction of this subject; for instance, Anais routinely plays the "birthday game" in which in private moments she narrates the story of her life to herself, choosing birthplace, parents and family circumstances. Moreover, in her voracity for sex, drugs, alcohol and adventure she can also be identified as the post-feminist figure McRobbie terms the "phallic girl", a young woman who indulges in masculine behaviour and adventures, "for whom the freedoms associated with masculine sexual pleasures are not just made available but encouraged and also

celebrated" (83). This "licensed mimicry of their male counterparts" can even accommodate lesbian desire, and Anais' fluid sexuality is apparent throughout the novel. However, as McRobbie argues:

The phallic girl gives the impression of having won equality with men by becoming like her male counterparts. But in this adoption of the phallus, there is no critique of masculine hegemony [...] She is being asked to concur with a definition of sex as light-hearted pleasure, recreational activity, hedonism, sport, reward and status [...] but without relinquishing her own desirability to men, indeed for whom such seeming masculinity enhances her desirability since she shows herself to have a similar sexual appetite to her male counterparts. But this is a thin tightrope to walk, it asks of girls that they perform masculinity, without relinquishing the femininity which makes them so desirable to men. (83-3)

Again this delineates the double entanglement of subjectivation and objectification already observed, the tension produced by the "tightrope" act of accessing masculinised pleasures which dehumanise women. For all her "phallic" energy, Anais certainly recognises the significance of hegemonic femininity, its painstakingly constructed nature and its agonised characterisation:

Pick up my lipstick and take the lid off. This shade of red is absolutely perfect. I need tae get a pencil in a matching colour, or just a wee bit darker. Lips have to be outlined really, if you're not blessed with bee-stung. It's easy tae make a cupid's-bow-look more pout than it is. It's the same with a lack of right-angled cheekbones or supernatural baby blues or tawny owls. There are ways to make it work. Sometimes I make something so pretty, I dinnae even think it's me. It's

not that I think I'm perfect. I'm so imperfect it's offensive. Totally and utterly fucked in fact – but I like pillbox hats. (22-3)

The wound of 'bee-stung' and the deathly unnatural association of 'supernatural baby blues' or even 'right-angled cheekbones' present desirable femininity through a lens of pain and ambivalence. Anais ultimately distances herself from the feminine perfection represented by a Dior lipstick that is pillar-box red – a reference to the publicly-facilitated communication system of letter boxes, suggesting the lipstick as a similar container and conveyer of sanctioned messages – though she does associate herself with pillbox hats, alluding to a container with an altogether different shape and purpose and connotation for femininity, as medicated rather than simply mediated. Anais is sceptical, then; she knows how to reproduce the (hyper)feminine masquerade even though she does not recognise herself in it. In fact over the page she avoids her eyes in the mirror as "It's funny when you make yourself feel uncomfortable" (24). All this signals an ambivalent estrangement from hegemonic models of the female self, in particular the "post-feminist masquerade" and its "ironic, quasi-feminist staking out of a distance in the act of taking on the garb of femininity" (McRobbie 64).

Though informed by the discourses of postfeminism, then, the novel entertains the possibility of resisting its neoliberal ideals. There are several areas of refusal of dominant discourses which stake out a dissident discursive space of rebellion. Anais' ethical stance on relations – "I'd die before I'd pick on someone" (71) – marks her out as rejecting the instrumental use of people and relationships which marks the violent competitive individualism and commodification of sex in the world of the novel. In an expansion of this stance to the animal world, she is vegetarian. Her fluid sexuality encompasses same-sex relations, but, furthermore, lesbian relationships are

presented as an ideal, in her own relationship with Hayley, and the partnership of Tash and Isla whose devotion to each other is recognised in a simulated wedding ceremony. The solidarity between the young people in the care home itself undermines individualism; interrelationality is emphasised as vulnerability and dependence on others condition the liveability of what Judith Butler calls "precarious life" (see 2004). This rejection of the supremacy of an individualist autonomy advocated in the discourses of neoliberalism and postfeminism permeates the novel. In this context Anais' psychic connection with others in her ability to "see" their past lives and "hear" their thoughts signifies an occulted interrelationality, a covert substitute for the physical and material relations of trust and dependence denied by extreme individualism.

The success of this dissident discursive space in opposing postfeminist ideals and values is precarious and insecure. Certainly those designated as failures by these postfeminist standards – as much relegated as such by class as well as gender – are left vulnerable to exploitation, objectification and sexual commodification. Mother Teresa is not the only character to suffer the extreme implications of the sex industry; several of the young people work as prostitutes, and Tash disappears while working on the street, presumably murdered by a client. Isla, vilified as a teenage mother, and one who has passed on the HIV virus to her children, kills herself after Tash's disappearance, concluding a sad history of self-harm. Anais herself is subjected to multiple rape and assault as she is deceived into delivering herself up to a gang involved in making online pornography in order to pay off the "debt" of her jailed lover, Jay. His shocking exploitation of Anais, explicitly enabled by their previous intimacy, is an extreme example of the violent containment

and abuse of female sexuality pervasive throughout both these novels, in both word and deed.

Though brought to the brink of annihilation, Anais survives this ordeal and indeed escapes her predicament; the novel ends as she boards a train to France to start a new life. Threatened throughout the narrative with punishment for her misdemeanours by incarceration in a secure unit, a fate that Anais recognises would be unbearable, her escape means she avoids the catastrophic punishing ends of her mothers. In the final paragraphs she presents what can be considered her own "manifesto of the self":

I'll learn French and get a room on a back street – maybe I'll walk my rescue-dog by the river four times a day. I'll go to galleries, and read everything in their libraries, even the manuals, even the papers. I'll eat chocolate croissants for breakfast. And I won't take any lovers for ten years. I'll wash my hair in lavender shampoo. I'll browse couture shops, and junk bazaars. I'll go to the Moulin Rouge. I'll write poetry in the back of dark bars. I'll watch live sex shows and wank forty times in a row. (323-4)

This personal manifesto resists and satirizes the "well-planned life" of the postfeminist subject. Art and the imagination are foregrounded here, as, away from mainstream education, Anais plans to tap alternative, submerged knowledge and write poetry. This is a radical self-invention, away from the marketplace of the commodified self through which the neoliberal individual is coerced into being. Possibilities are evoked of connecting with dissident histories and discourses, and the text's final exclamations articulate this yearning: "Vive flying cats and cigarillo-smoking Outcast Queens! Vive Le Revolution. Vive Le Dreamers. Vive Le Dream" (324). Though Anais' future can only be speculated upon, the optimistic impulse of

this ending, and its exhortations of life and revolution, take us away from the oppressive institutions of a normative life and provides sustenance for a new beginning.

Of relevance here is McRobbie's argument that the postfeminist subject "functions on the part of dominant culture to re-instate boundaries, with the effect that life outside the heterosexual matrix requires the production of distinctly other queer spaces and temporalities" (86-7). For if, as Judith Halberstam argues, queer relations to time and space make possible the conceptualization of "a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing [and] imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (2), Anais' formulation of a non-productive and non-reproductive future presents a queer challenge to the neoliberalised postfeminist values which inform and shape contemporary modes of feminine citizenship. Finally, the suggestive liminality which characterises Fagan's novel adds to the queering instability of its world and presents for the reader an intriguing and resonant series of images which evoke the possibility of evading the constraints and nullified freedoms of the postfeminist accord.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have argued that the bleak and disempowered representations of female life and selfhood found in *Born Free* and *The Panopticon* can be understood as interrogations of a contemporary period in critical relation with discourses of femininity and feminism. This feminine disorientation can be connected with the emergence of neoliberal postfeminist discursive regimes which construct a series of double entanglements in offering female freedoms while simultaneously exerting

constraint through reinvigorated patriarchal pressure to conform to limited models of femininity, the contradictions of which exert a dangerous, irreconcilable tension on individual women. In both novels this is demonstrated particularly through the punishment and exploitation of female sexuality; the difficulty of expressing a sexual femininity outside of a male-centred model is a major theme of both texts and highlights the dangers of defying convention. The deaths and disappearances of Tash, Isla, Mother Teresa and the Outcast Queen in *The Panopticon* are violent illustration of the extremes of this danger, while Joni and Angie's re-containment within the drudgery of the dysfunctional family is punishment for their attempt to appropriate sexual agency in *Born Free*. In highlighting moments of crisis both novels exhibit a fractious relation with a feminism fraught with its own repudiation and dissolving into the discourses of the contemporary "life politics" of neoliberalism. Further, between them the texts trace a trajectory encompassing a repression of the radical ideas of second wave feminism in the emergence of postfeminism. In *Born Free* we leave the female characters trapped in a hostile world having failed to achieve self-determination by means of a sexual revolution appropriated and cruelly manipulated by a resurgent patriarchy. However, in contrast, *The Panopticon* leaves us in a liminal space between identities and nations beyond which Anais' finds cause for optimism and opportunity, after having survived the violence of a brutalising life on the margins. While the former represents a feminist defeat, the latter provides a surprising flutter of hope that what seems like an inescapable misogyny, which adapts to and exploits every freedom that feminism achieves, has cracks through which resistance can be mobilised. Though the journey is a cruel one, the text's championing of imagination provides one possible line of flight for the brave dissident.

Capturing a contemporary potentially disabling feminine disorientation, the two novels provide a critique of postfeminist discourses of individual freedom, empowerment and choice; here the individual exists in relation to social context, to the existence of others, to ideological discourses which control her possibilities in a hostile world. Only a structural critique of the power relations of this cultural context can liberate the individual from blame for her predicament. The present increase in feminist activism exploring the potential of new modes of consciousness raising and direct action, such as the "everyday sexism project", "Hollaback", "Slutwalk", "Pussy Riot" and "Femin", are providing just such a critique, leading to creative analyses of contemporary culture and political opposition to an increasingly privatized society. In particular, *The Panopticon*'s dissident discursive spaces which create opportunities for the dissemination, debate and fictional testing of oppositional discourses places the novel in conversation with these emerging feminist critiques. The kinds of yearning informing these fiction and activist contexts – for social justice, freedom from violence, social and political equality, a fulfilling life – are not at the moment leading to the sort of unified mass movement often nostalgically eulogised. However, such yearning is propelling a mobilisation of a range of radical discourses in a process of disruption pressing for change. These novels are in themselves structural critiques, highlighting the constraint and oppression exerted on women, young and old, and foregrounding the dangers facilitated by class inequality in women's lives. In this, they insist the feminist struggle is far from over, far from "past", and enter into the call for the new analyses and strategies that are necessary if female selfhood is to escape its neo-patriarchal containment.

## **Works Cited**



- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.
- Connell, R.W. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995.
- Duggan, Lisa. *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.
- Fagan, Jenni. *The Panopticon*. London: Heinemann, 2012.
- Gill, Rosalind. *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.
- Gill, Rosalind and Christina Scharff (eds). *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Hemmings, Clare. *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. London: Duke UP, 2011.
- Hird, Laura. *Born Free*. Edinburgh: Rebel Inc, 2000.
- Jackson, Stevi and Sue Scott (eds). *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996.
- Jones, Carole. *Disappearing Men: Gender Disorientation in Scottish Fiction 1979-1999*. Amsterdam/New Yor: Rodopi, 2009.
- McRobbie, Angela. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. London: SAGE, 2009.
- Munford, Rebecca and Melanie Waters. *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique*. London: I.B. Taurus, 2014.
- Norquay, Glenda. "'Partial to Intensity': the Novels of A. L. Kennedy." *The Contemporary British Novel*. Eds. James Acheson and Sarah C. E. Ross. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005. 142-53.
- Phipps, Alison. *The Politics of the Body*. London: Polity, 2014.
- Tong, Rosemarie. *Feminist Thought*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Boulder: Westview Press, 2009.

Weeks, Jeffrey. *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800*.

Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1981.

Whelehan, Imelda. *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to "Post-*

*Feminism"*. New York: New York UP, 1995.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Devolutionary writing" refers to the prolific output of Scottish writing produced between the referenda of 1979 and 1997 when the people of Scotland voted on the devolving of power from Westminster.